IBM good bet, but others also deserve a look

Let's start this week's column by asking a very basic question, one that's on the minds of many small-computer buyers these days: Why "buy IBM" when so many other attractive alternatives exist?

The question is a good one, given IBM's clear dominance in the small business computer market today. But the answer is going to be different depending on where you fall among three different types of business users.

The following are typical responses from those in each group.

✔ First-time buyers: "It doesn't seem to make sense for me to buy IBM. The sales people at each store show me computers that operate even better at a lower price. They seem more enthusiastic about the other equipment, and said it runs the same or similar software just as well. This is all very confusing, but since I have to depend on the store for support after I buy, why not take their advice?"

✔ Second-time buyers: "I'm going to buy IBM this time. My first computer worked OK, but I was hampered by the limited software and the lack of add-on equipment. It didn't help when the manufacturer went bankrupt — my local dealer couldn't get replacement parts, and the software publishers stopped providing updates. I've learned my lesson — this time I'll play it safe with IBM."

✔ Third-time buyers, or those looking for add-on equipment: "I'm comfortable with my second computer. Now that I know exactly what my needs are, I'm very reluctant to change to non-IBM computers and face that uncertainty — even if I can save some money. I think I'll buy a more advanced IBM system or upgrade my current one."

Each of these positions makes some sense. But here's how I'd improve on them.

First-time advice

The most common advice given to first-time buyers is that while it's nice to learn from your mistakes, it's even nicer to learn from those of others. The most common mistake is buying a system that you'll end up wanting to replace, rather than upgrade, later on. Thousands of first-time purchasers have already learned it is much easier to upgrade an IBM PC or XT than any other small computer available. So unless you are adventurous, avoid the temptation to cut your teeth on another type of system.

It also doesn't make sense to build your first system with non-IBM hardware add-ons. Why add another level of complexity — and possibly some incompatibility — to an otherwise easy-to-use system?

But for second-time buyers, it's a different story. In my opinion, many second-time buyers are too dogmatic about not mixing and matching IBM and non-IBM components. Tired of being burned, they frequently turn too conservative. The truth is, substantial performace and price advantages can be achieved by adding selected non-IBM equipment to your PC or XT.

The trick, of course, is selecting the right equipment.

Take, for instance, one product area: volume data storage. There are probably over 100 hard disk combinations to choose from, with varying degrees of dependability and compatibility. I've found that a surprising number of the "cheapy" drives are amazingly incompatible with IBM PC software, regardless of what the flashy mail-order advertisements say.

But to continue with the hard drive example, I've also found some non-IBM drives that are tailor-made for certain situations.

For instance, a PC owner can buy a 20-megabyte non-IBM drive *and* a backup tape drive for not much more than it takes to upgrade to a 10-megabyte IBM drive. You get as much storage as an IBM PC-AT, plus the backup.

Building storage capacity

Someone who owns a PC-XT, with a 10-megabyte hard drive, can take advantage of add-on systems that can add huge amounts of storage capacity, much more than the 20 megabytes in the AT, plus tape backup, which is easier than the 1.2 megabyte floppies provided with the AT — all without having to buy an entire new system. (For more information on add-on alternatives, write me at the address below.)

By the time someone gets to their third computer system, they may be street-wise and quite willing to buy non-IBM equipment, even to build a system around a non-IBM computer.

But you can go too far. There's a lot of questionable merchandise out there, and any shopping should be for equipment that's sufficiently demonstrated to work as advertised, with a strong base of users and a good reputation among those users.

In conclusion, first-time buyers must look at whether, by buying a non-IBM computer, they are setting themselves up to buy a whole new system later on. But once you've gone through a couple of computer systems, you should have the confidence and patience to seek out some of these less publicized, though sometimes more attractive, non-IBM equipment alternatives.

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